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ABSTRACT

The qualitative research method of focus group interviewing was employed in a study of the subjective meaning of newswatching for the average American. Thirty-two adults were interviewed in four groups of seven to nine people each, and the audiotapes of the discussions were analyzed for comments on various aspects of television newscasters (the topic used by the group moderator) and the subjects' self-generated topic areas. The responses of the subjects indicated that they grouped television newscasters' characteristics into physical considerations (voice and overall attractiveness) and professional considerations (energy, relaxation, and trust). Most of the comments generated by the subjects fell into four topic areas: political party convention coverage, rapid camera and electronic news gathering procedures, why the subjects watched the specific station they did, and general criticism of television news. The results also indicated the worth of using a qualitative method like focus group interviewing in the study of television news. (RL)

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THE AUDIENCE EXPERIENCE WITH TELEVISION NEWS: A QUALITATIVE STUDY

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For the past twenty years television has been ranked by Americans as their number one daily news source. Not only the most consumed source (Steiner, 1963; Bower, 1973; Roper, 1979; Barrett & Sklar, 1980) television news is also cited as the most believed (Roper, 1979; Public Agenda Foundation, 1980). Since television news is a staple of American life, social science research is being done in an attempt to characterize how it works. As James Smith (1977) found by examining articles published in scholarly journals (Journal of Broadcasting, Journal of Communication, Journalism Quarterly, and Public Opinion Quarterly for 1955 through 1975), most research on television news can be put into three broad categories: "(a) the content of the news . . . (b) the role and effect of the source or newscaster; and (c) television as a news medium." (p. 111) As Smith points out, this categorization divides television news into message, source and channel considerations as perceived by the researcher. Minimized are the receiver or audience. Left our are attempts to "operationalize concepts in terms of receiver perceptions." (p. 111)

As characterized by Mark Levy (1978) in a monograph concerning the audience experience with television news:

> Recently, and somewhat belatedly, social scientists have begun to study the institutions and processes of broadcast journalism . . . Nevertheless, to date, little research has been directed toward what Lazarsfeld called 'the audience experience,' that is, the subjective meaning of newswatching for the average American. (Levy, 1978, p.1)

The purpose of this study is to focus on the "subjective meaning"

of television news as defined by the audience. To that end, a qualitative research method was chosen to maximize audience input while minimizing researcher direction. Following Levy (1978), focused group discussions were used to try and elicit the richest and most varied audience response.

METHOD

Focused group discussion are only recently appearing in the social science literature on mass media (Levy, 1978). While this method has been extensively used in marketing research (Higginbotham & Cox, 1979), it's worth for generating new information when "little is known" (Wells, 1974, p. 2) is fairly new to mass media research literature. This method grew out of group therapy methods used by psychiatrists and is particularly useful in securing in-depth information on a topic through a discussion group atmosphere (Bellenger, Bernhardt & Goldstucker, 1976). This method is particularly useful in generating information as a predecessor to the use of more established data gathering instruments and methods. The research reported here is the first in a two-part data gathering effort concerning the audience experience with television news. The second part will use the more established quantititiave method of telephone interviews.

Four group discussions were conducted during July and August 1980. Following the suggestions of marketing researchers (Caruso, 1976; Templeton, 1976, and Levy, 1979), three of the four in-depth

discussions took place in the homes of contacts used by the author to secure the discussants. The fourth discussion, with university students, took place in a university building. Refreshments were available, the setting was made to be as comfortable as possible, and each participant was paid a small fee for their help. Each discussion lasted approximately an hour and one-half and all were audio taped for later analysis. The author developed questions to start the discussion and acted as moderator for all discussions. Each subject filled out a short demographic questionaire at the conclusion of their session.

Audio tape analysis was a three step process:

(1) Each interview was reviewed in its entirety and notes were made on general topics and trends with special note on all topics introduced by the subjects.

(2) Each discussion was then played and stopped every ten seconds while extensive notes were taken on all responses and specific words and terms used by the subjects.

(3) The notes from steps (1) and (2) were reviewed for ideas and comments from the subjects concerning their television newswatching experience.

Because of the subtleties and nuances contained in the taped interview material, reliability measures need to be established for this type of method by having the tapes reviewed by several investigators. The situation is similar to the need for intercoder reliability in the research methodology of content analysis. Although

some of the material in this investigation was reviewed by another researcher, more review is planned before the next part of this research is done.

Validity concerns, of course, will be checked by using the material gathered here as a basis for the telephone interview schedule used in the next phase of research. Indeed, the whole purpose of this effort is to try and elict audience responses which will make sense to that same audience when presented back to them

SAMPLE

Thirty-two adults (over 18 years of age) were recruited by contacts known to the author. One group was held to all female members (8), one group to male members (9), one group mixed sexes (8), and one group of mixed sexes and all university students (7). The group size was held between 7 and 9 on the recommendations of marketing researchers (Higginbotham & Cox, 1979). Nontelevision news watchers were excluded, as were any individuals with an inordinate amount of information about or contact with television news (reporters, camera news operators, television researchers). The contacts were instructed to secure television news watchers who, it was felt in the contact's opinion, were willing to discuss their viewing experiences. Diversity was encouraged and no more than two members of any one household or immediate family were accepted across all groups.

Seventeen men and 15 women were interviewed. According to self reports, the sample had an average age of 29.6 years and ranged in

age from 18 to 50. Exactly half (50%) charterized their home dwelling as located in an urban area and the other half as suburban (no rural). The average household came to $30,000 per year and ranged from $7,000 to $60,000. Each household averaged just over two cars (2.2) and over four (4.1) working radio sets. The average for television sets per household was just under three (2.8) with half the sets color (52%). Cable penetration in the participants homes was 40%.

Various occupations were represented in this sample. The largest group were university students (9) which wasn't surprising since one group of seven was made up of only students. The next largest job category was management/professional (7), followed by skilled labor (6), sales (4), teachers (2), and homemakers (2). One person indicated employment as a sculptor and one as a mathametics research scientist.

The subjects stated they watched television news on a fairly regular schedule. Over two-thirds (69%) watched an average of 4.3 early evening local newscasts per week; four-fifths (84%) watched an average of 3.7 weekly late evening local newscasts; and over two-thirds (69%) watched an average of 3.7 early evening national newscasts per week. ABC's Nightline, the only available national late evening newscast was warched by one-third (37.5%) of the subjects an average of about twice (1.7) per week. Only a third (28%) watched television news on a regular basis in the morning, with three-quarters of those warching the reports on Good Morning America. In addition, one of five (22%) caught "newsbreaks" during the evening

prime time period and half (50%) tuned into some type of special news programs or reports regularly.

RESULTS

Focused group interviewing doesn't yield the delineated results generated by more traditional quantitative methods (Higginbotham & Cox, 1979). Although the moderator was careful to keep the discussions focused on television news, self-generated group responses were welcomed and encouraged. The four research groups worked well together and moved easily as a unit from one topic to another. Analyzing the results was similar to putting together a puzzle; taking one comment from here and one related comment from there. The resulting picture shows patterns formed by the relationship of the individual comments and reactions.

Analysis of the taped material revealed several patterns. Probably as a result of the moderator's periodic attempts to interject newscasters as the topic of discussion, much of the resulting information dealt with various aspects of the television newscaster. Those results will be presented first, followed by the subjects' self-generated topic areas.

Comments about newscasters fell into two main subject areas and several subareas. The first main subject area was labeled "physical" and this area was further subdivided into "overall attractiveness" and "voice". The second main area was labeled "professional"; and this area was further subdivided into "energy", "relaxation", and "trust". During the discussion of these results, the all male group will be

referred to as "male", the all female group as "female", and the mixed sexes group as "mixed", with the university students called "students".

Physical

The first main grouping of comments under the "physical" area concerning television newscasters was labeled "overall attractiveness". All four groups mentioned overall attractiveness when commenting on what they liked and disliked about television newscasters. One local newsteam was characterized by the female and mixed groups as "all attractive men" and "attractive and professional looking people on the set." The mixed and student groups also complimented two local newscasters and one national newscaster (Geraldo Rivera) on their overall looks. These same groups also had critical comments for other local male newscasters with comments such as: "I don't like the way he looks," "he looks like he's been on a four-day drunk," and "he looks like a little kid, like he was in preschool and they should have someone more mature looking."

Female newscasters generally fared better in the category of "overall attractiveness". Jane Pauley, Sandy Hill and Jessica Savitch were chosen by several in the male group when asked which newscaster would they choose if they could have only one. When asked why, the general reply was "they look good." The students complimented one local female newscaster on her overall appearance. The mixed group had a mixed reaction to one local female newscaster and also felt the overall trend is to have newscasters who are "only the younger, good looking people."

The second subarea under "physical" was labeled "voice". Comments about newscasters voices cut across the groups. As with "overall attractiveness", the comments were mixed. Most of the negative comments were directed at local newscasters with statements of "no emotion in his voice," and "doesn't move his lips" leading the list for all groups except the male group. Barbara Walters was the only national newscaster receiving more than one negative comment concerning voice. Characterized as "a terrible voice, whiney" by the students, and "surprised she got this far with a speech impediment" by the female group, Walters' voice elicited several negative reactions. Charles Osgood, Jessica Savitch, Ted Koppel, Max Robinson and Geraldo Rivera received compliments on their voices from members of each of the four groups.

Professional

The first subarea under "professional" is "energy" which was further subdivided into "subject interest" and "audience interest". "Subject interest" is a quality some newscasters communicate to their audience as though they like what they are doing. These newscasters appear as though they would have newscasting as a hobby if they weren't being paid for the effort. Geraldo Rivera was the only national newscaster mentioned in this category and by the female group. One local weathercaster was mentioned by all four groups. This person is an airplane pilot and an avid gardner (he gives gardening tips during his weathercast) and both of these side interests were seen as additional reasons for his interest in weathercasting. One female local co-anchor was given high marks

in this subarea by the mixed group with comments such as: "likes what she is doing and knows what she is talking about," and "you feel she is into it and this is her thing."

The other subdivision under "energy" was "audience interest", and this applied to newscasters who appartently made contact with their audience. The local weathercaster who is "into" his work also seemed to communicate well with his audience. With comments such as "he is talking to you, not just reading," and "puts himself into his weather report," this person was praised by both the mixed group and the students. One local anchor was criticized by both the male and student groups as seemingly disinterested and distant; while that station's other co-anchor got good comments from the students for presenting material at a pace which was "easy to absorb."

The second subarea under "professional" was labeled "relaxation". Once again, local newscasters seemed to generate most of the comments. Characterizing the banter between one local anchor and the sportcaster as "a dog and pony show," and "like a Chevy Chase scene," local newscasters generally got critical comments from the male group. The female group thought another station's news team was good at presenting a relaxed appearance and would have added to that atmosphere by having the group work in shirt sleeves. The women also thought that same station's sportcaster, who doesn't wear a tie, looks relaxed and "the way a sports reporter should look." Frank Reynolds was the only national newscaster complimented for an easy going style.

The third subarea under "professional", and by far the one receiving the most comments, was labeled "trust". Walter Cronkite

and "trust" were a universally noted combination. From the female group: "Walter isn't going to lie to you," "you know what's coming out of his mouth is true," and "daddy's going to tell us the new." From the male group: "If Walter tells you the news, it is all right," and "a person you can trust." From the mixed group: "his years in the business give him the necessary experience." From the students: "Walter has been around so long everyone trusts him. He could say the world is flat and everyone would believe him."

On the local level, the weathercaster who scored well in both the subdivisions of "energy" and one female co-anchor fared well in the "trust" subarea. The students comments about the weathercaster included "he knows what he is talking about and sounds positive," and "you believe him." The female group commented on a female co-anchor with "she acts like she could be me, a normal lady."

Participant generated areas

Most of the comments generated by the subjects and not centered on newscasters fell into four topic areas: political party convention coverage, rapid camera and ENG procedures, why the subjects watched the specific station they did, and general criticism of television news.

Both the female and male groups thought there was too much coverage of the political party conventions. It must be remembered the groups were interviewed around the time of both major political party conventions. With comments such as "there is no reason all three networks had to cover the conventions," and "it's just a big

pep rally anyway," and "they can have their fun, but why do we have to watch it," the two groups generally complained about the coverage.

The use of rapid cameras and other instant and live news gathering equipment and tactics fared about the same as the convention coverage. The male, female and mixed groups all thought the helicopters used by local stations were overused and not worth the resulting visuals. With comments such as "you don't get much thrill seeing them fly over a burning building or a traffic accident," and "the helicopter craze will blow over," and "it's too fast, the facts are never in before it's on the air," all the groups except the males thought the current status of live and instant coverage was a detriment to overall news quality.

The two most mentioned reasons for watching a certain station was "habit" and "because the set was on that channel for another program." People from the female, male, and mixed groups all said they watched a specific national newscast because of their parents had gotten them in the habit. Many of these people had gotten in the habit of watching CBS news and Walter Cronkite. Others said they watched whatever channel was on before or after a selected program.

The major criticism leveled by the discussants was that television news is primarily a "big business." According to the female group, television news is a "show" done because of "ratings battles." The male group also accused the news shows of getting their drive from "ratings only." The mixed group was the most sophisticated in their general criticisms. For example, when discussing the instant analysis

after a Presidential address, one member of the mixed group talked about the speech going out to the whole world on satellite and that the news people were provided copies of the speech to analyze prior to the actual broadcast. Another member talked about the career routes open to the newscaster and used as an example Ed Bradley's Sunday night anchor spot coming on the heels of his Vietnam reporting and the fact Bradley was the last reporter to leave Vietnam in 1974.

DISCUSSION

The results of this investigation indicate the worth of focused group interviewing as a research method which yields rich and subject centered responses. Once started by the moderator, the subjects controlled the discussion. Not only the discussion direction, but also the depth and length of time spent on a specific topic was determined by the discussants, not the researcher. The variety and quality of the responses indicate focused group interviewing can make a contribution in this arena of research.

Focused group discussions increases the richness and depth of the responses because of the time the subjects had to think about the topic prior to the discussion. Indeed, the topic was told to each participant as he or she was recruited. Although they didn't know the starting questions, they had comments ready concerning the topic of television newswatching. Telephone interviewing, for example, asks subjects to respond rapidly and without time to think about the topic. Telephone interviewing and other established quantitative methods

should be used when quantity and less in-depth responses are sought. Focused group interviewing can make a contribution for getting at the more complex "subjective meaning of newswatching for the average American." (Levy, 1978, p. 1)

Also evident in the results is the tendency of the respondents to chunk characteristics they find important in television newscasters. While some quantitative methods may be able to ask subjects about hair color (Sanders & Pritchett, 1971), sex (Stone, 1973), and smile (Tankard, et. al., 1977) of the television newscaster, this investigation finds the audience probably adds the details together into an overall reaction. The findings of "overall attractiveness" and "professional" point toward an audience experience which is more of a composite than many quantitative methods are able to handle. It is possible the newswatching experience can't be fully understood without using various types of methods, including the more qualitative ones.

Several future uses could be made of focused group interviewing. Much of the literature Smith (1977) found in the journals which fell into the category of newscaster "role and effect" might be compared with the results of focused group interviewing to see if the same responses are prevalant in differing approaches. Another use might be for generating future studies on the more interesting aspects of the television newscaster. Why and how some newscasters appeal to the audience with their voices while others do not would make an interesting research topic.

Focused group interviewing does appear to be potentially

helpful in the search for the subjective meaning of the newswatching experience. Future mass media literature will probably include more qualitative methods along side the more commonly used quantitative methods and the combination of methods will help researchers understand the interaction between the audience and the television newscast.

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